



# U.S. Department of Labor

Employment Standards Administration  
Wage and Hour Division

May 2000

## Youth Employment



### Total Youth Employment

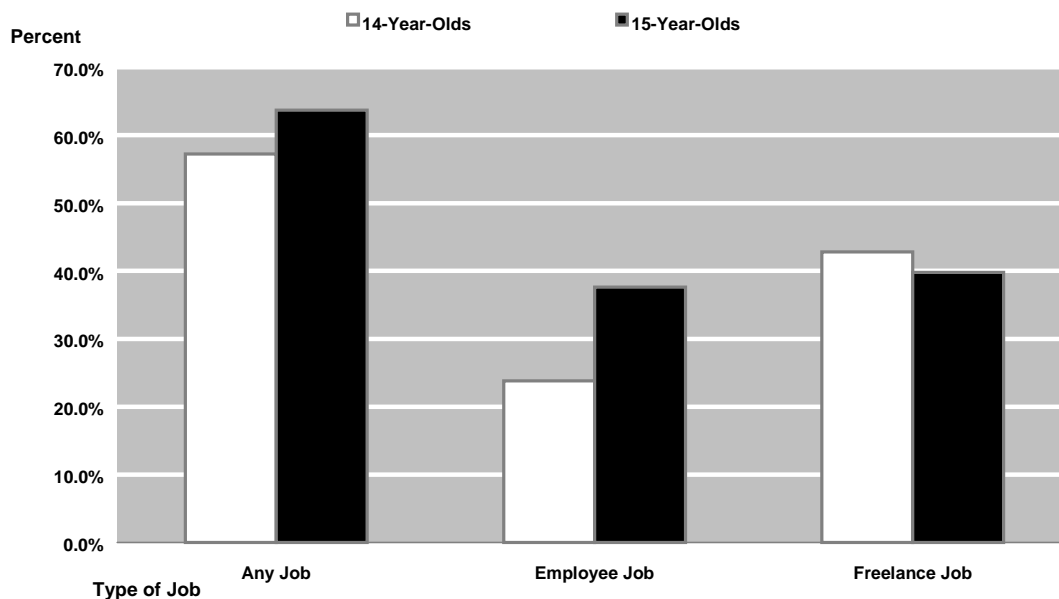
There are about 3.9 million youths in each age cohort from age 14 to age 17—a total population in this age group of about 15.5 million youngsters.<sup>1</sup> Workforce participation in this population increases with age, and more kids work during the summer months than during the school year at each age. A reasonable estimate is that about 5 to 6 million minors work in regular jobs as employees (as described below) at some time each year.

More than half of 14-year-olds and nearly two-thirds of 15-year-olds participate in some type of work ac-

tivity while those ages. Work, as defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics' National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), can include "employee" jobs in which the youth has an ongoing relationship with a particular employer, such as a supermarket or restaurant; and "freelance" jobs, like babysitting or mowing lawns. More youths worked "freelance" jobs while age 14, but nearly a quarter of 14-year-olds work regular jobs as employees. From age 14, youths move towards more formal work arrangements—working more in "employee" jobs and less in "freelance" activities. More than one-third of youths work in regular jobs as employees while age 15 (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1

Percent of Youth Working While Age 14 or 15 By Type of Job



Source: USDOL, BLS National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997

These NLSY97 estimates refer to any work done during the entire year while youths were age 14 or 15. The Bureau of Labor Statistics' monthly Current Population Survey (CPS), on the other hand, measures any work done for pay during a referenced week (*i.e.*, the week before the survey) and, therefore, represents a snapshot of employment for a particular week. The monthly CPS indicates that in 1998, nearly 3 in 10 (just under 3.3 million) 15- to 17-year-olds were employed at the time they were surveyed. They worked either as paid employees, in their own businesses, or for 15 hours or more in a family-operated business.

Although these various studies differ in their estimates of the incidence of youth employment, they all indicate that the number of teens who work increases with age. The CPS data suggest that hours increase with age and more 15- to 17-year-olds work during the summer months than during the school year. The increase in the number of youths who work during the summer is the largest for 15-year-olds—nearly twice as many work during the summer than are employed during the school year (*Tables 1 and 2*).

Table 1

### YOUTH ARE MORE LIKELY TO WORK DURING SUMMER MONTHS

	15-YEAR-OLDS	16-YEAR-OLDS	17-YEAR-OLDS
SCHOOL	10%	26%	41%
SUMMER	18%	36%	49%

Source: USDOL, BLS Current Population Survey 1998

The NLSY97 found that 36 percent of youths ages 14 to 16<sup>2</sup> who were in school had worked at an employee job at some point while school<sup>3</sup> was in session during 1996: 28 percent worked both during school and in the summer months and 8 percent worked only during school months. Six percent worked only during the summer months. Students employed during both the school year and summer worked 59 percent of school weeks and 77 percent of the summer weeks on average. In contrast, those students who worked only during the school year worked only a quarter of the school weeks and those who worked during the summer usually worked

slightly over half of the summer weeks.

Table 2

### YOUTH WORK MORE HOURS IN SUMMER MONTHS

	15-YEAR-OLDS	16-YEAR-OLDS	17-YEAR-OLDS
SCHOOL	12	16	18
SUMMER	19	23	25

Source: USDOL, BLS Current Population Survey 1998

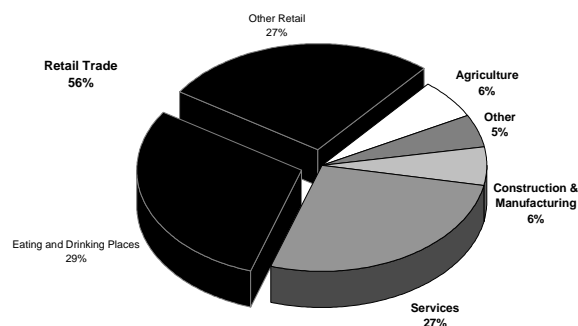
### Where Youths Work

The CPS provides data on youth employment by occupation and industry. The 1998 data show that more than half of 15- to 17-year-old working youths are employed in retail—half of whom work in eating and drinking establishments. The services industry comprises just over a quarter of youth employment while construction/manufacturing together and agriculture each account for about six percent (*Figure 2*).

Although they hold many types of jobs, the largest number of teenage workers is employed in food preparation and service occupations (*Figure 3*).

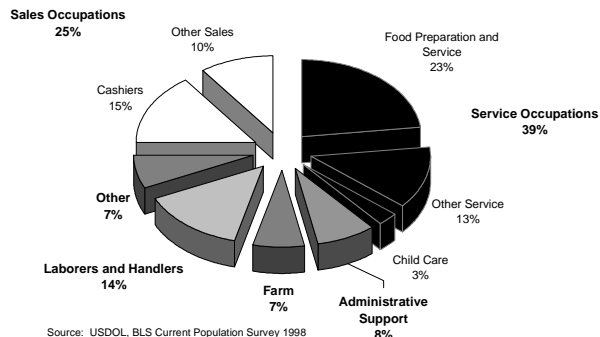
Figure 2

### Most Youth (15- to 17-Year-Olds) Work in Retail



Source: USDOL, BLS Current Population Survey 1998

Figure 3  
Most Youth (15- to 17-Year Olds) Work in Food Preparation & Service Occupations



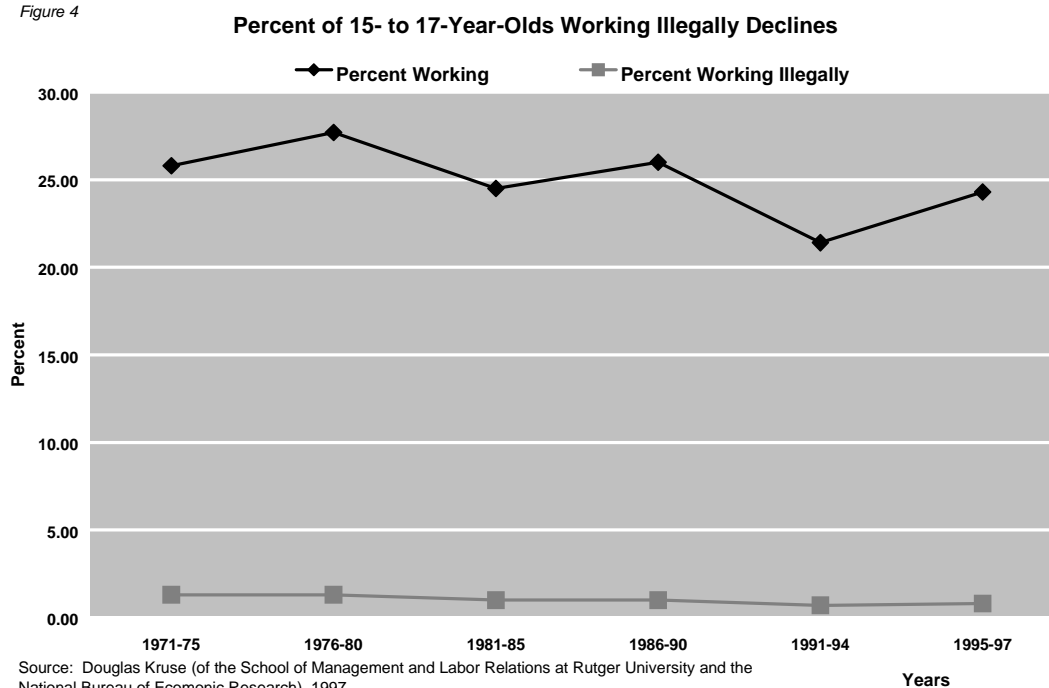
## Illegal Youth Employment

Precise data on the number of children illegally employed in the United States remain elusive. While there have been a number of efforts to assess the dimensions of this problem, including by the General Accounting Office, a 1997 study conducted for the *Associated Press* by Douglas Kruse (of the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers University and the National Bureau of Economic Research) provides the best currently available estimate of the number of children employed in violation of Federal or State child labor laws.<sup>4</sup> The Kruse study—which did not involve original re-

search, but rather examined available data and literature (including the CPS, the March supplement to CPS and two prior longitudinal studies)—estimates that some 148,000 minors ages 17 and younger are illegally employed in an average week—most in non-agricultural employment. According to Kruse, despite significant recent increases in the population of working age youths—the “baby boom echo”—the proportion of all youths who work has declined—from about 26 percent in the 1970s and 1980s to about 24 percent in the 1990s. Further, from the same study, the proportion of all youths who are employed illegally has dropped by nearly 40 percent, from 1.3 percent in the 1970s to about .8 percent in the 1990s (*Figure 4*).

The GAO acknowledged in its 1998 report that data limitations on the number of young workers have hindered efforts to quantify the scope of child labor—both legal and illegal—in America. To bridge this gap in the data for agricultural employment, the Department of Labor is using additional resources from its fiscal year 1999 appropriations to enrich and enhance the National Agricultural Worker Survey (NAWS) to acquire better data on children working in agriculture.

Figure 4



## Data Sources

The Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has three sources of data on youth employment: the current National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97),<sup>5</sup> the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS), and the Annual Demographic Supplement to the Current Population Survey (March CPS).<sup>6</sup> Previous studies of youth employment in the economics literature have consistently found significant differences between the estimates from longitudinal surveys of youths and estimates from the CPS. Consistent with these previous studies, estimates of youth employment among the NLSY97, the monthly CPS and the March CPS differ substantially. Several factors contribute to these differences.

One factor contributing to the differences in youth employment estimates is the reference period, which for the NLSY97 captures information on each job that any youth who was of age 14 or older at the time of the first interview held from his/her 14<sup>th</sup> birthday to the data of the interview. The reference period for the two CPS surveys also differ. The monthly CPS provides information on employment activities during the calendar week that includes the 12<sup>th</sup> of the month. The March CPS provides information on work activity during the prior calendar year. Other factors are the extent to which the youth (rather than another family member) responds to the survey

questions, the number of questions, the degree of follow-up, and differences in data-collection methodology.

The NLSY97 has the advantage of being a personal visit survey designed to elicit a complete and detailed history of all jobs held by respondents. As such, it is more likely to capture short spells of employment that are characteristic of youth employment. Although the CPS shows lower estimates of youth employment than the NLSY97, it provides a consistent time series for assessing trends in youth employment. The basic concept of employment used in the monthly CPS—work activity in the calendar week prior to the survey—has not changed significantly since the survey began in the 1940s. The CPS is the only source for a data series of youth labor force activity over time and provides a wealth of information useful for analyzing youth employment, including demographic characteristics like race and sex, and employment indicators such as industry and occupation.

The NLS is more likely to capture short-term employment where young workers move periodically in and out of the labor force. For example, the NLS will capture a young worker who works the first week of every month during the summer. The CPS, however, may not capture employment data on such a worker because he/she would not have been employed during the week that includes the 12<sup>th</sup> of the month.

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## References

<sup>1</sup> At this time, the NLSY97 survey is the only instrument that measures "employee" jobs. The figures are only available for 14- and 15-year-olds. To derive a rough estimate of the number of young people aged 14 through 17 holding "employee" jobs, it is assumed that either the same percentage of 16- and 17-year-olds have "employee" jobs as 15-year-olds (leading to a total estimate across the four age groups of 5.4 million) or, more realistically, that a higher percentage of 16- and 17-year-olds hold "employee" jobs (in this case, the assumption is that 40 percent of 16-year-olds and 50 percent of 17-year-olds hold employee jobs, leading to an estimate of 5.9 million across the four age groups).

<sup>2</sup> Survey respondents were ages 15-16 as of December 31, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> The school year is defined as the 37-week period from January 7, 1996 to June 1, 1996 and from September 1, 1996 to December 21, 1996. The summer is defined as the 13-week period from June 2 to August 31, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Kruse's estimates of illegal employment were based on CPS data and relied largely on the occupation of young workers and their usual hours worked. Kruse matched Federal occupation restrictions to CPS occupation codes to determine which individuals appeared to be employed illegally. The study also estimated illegal employment for 14- and 15- year-olds where their usual hours worked exceeded the Federal standards. Adjustments were made to account for work not subject to the Federal FLSA restrictions. State restrictions were also coded and applied to employment in those States with standards higher than the Federal standards.

<sup>5</sup> The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, is a nationally representative sample of 9,022 youths who were 12-16 years old as of December 31, 1996. The study is designed to document the transition from school to work and into adulthood and provides information on employment experiences, schooling, family background, social behavior, and other characteristics. An earlier study, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979, is available, but no longer provides current data on youth employment.

<sup>6</sup> The monthly Current Population Survey is a sample survey of about 50,000 households that provides information on the employment status of the civilian non-institutional population age 15 and over. The Annual Demographic supplement to the CPS is collected each March and includes a series of additional questions about income and work experience of the household respondent for the prior calendar year.